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Solidarity and trust in times of COVID-19

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European University Institute
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Abstract

COVID-19 generated some of the most profound economic and social impacts in living memory. In response to this emergency, European leaders approved an unprecedented recovery package, stepping up fiscal solidarity by mobilising the political capital generated by high pandemic solidarity. One year on, COVID-19 became familiar and vaccination plans advanced in earnest; simultaneously, restrictions lingered and the EU's leadership role is interrogated amidst the first appraisals of vaccination acquisition programmes and the recovery package implementation. How did one year of COVID-19 affect trust and solidarity in the EU? This report draws on new evidence collected by a survey fielded in April 2021 across 13 EU countries and the UK to assess it. Bad news first. While trust in other people and institutions did not collapse, it is still soberingly low and declining. People are generally less solidaristic in 2021 than in 2020. Debt and unemployment solidarity, already limited and controversial, receded even more, widening the gap between an austere North-West and a solidaristic South-East, a reminder that moral hazard concerns still bear heavily on EU solidarity. However, the general outlook remains quite positive: in the face of unequal hardship and mixed policy success, trust and solidarity remained stable, behaving more resiliently than assumed; support for restrictions and vaccination is still very high across all countries; support for solidarity in the event of exogenous shocks remains comfortably high, consonant to Europeans' preference for an insurance-based, reciprocal solidarity and a protective and global model for Europe; predilection for solidarity to be channelled via EU instruments instead of bilateral agreements is remarkably high; and strong attachment to the EU persists, having even increased 4% in 2021, narrowing the room for unsolidaristic recalcitrance. The demonstration effect that Next Generation EU can have in the future of EU solidarity ultimately depends on how well beneficiaries implement the resources and how efficiently fears of moral hazard can be quelled by adequate communication.

Keywords

EU; Solidarity; Trust, COVID-19; Next Generation EU; Public Opinion; YouGov.

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EUI-YouGov survey

The EUI-YouGov ‘Solidarity in Europe’ project, led by Anton Hemerijck and Philipp Genschel, started in 2018 and aims to conceptualise and analyse the evolution of European, transnational solidarity. Since 2018, the project is supported on a yearly survey which serves as input for datasets, media contributions, articles and policy briefs. Result analysis is structured around three main dimensions: issue (solidarity for what?), instrument (solidarity how?) and member state (solidarity for who?). The survey has been regularly replicated and extended to encompass more countries and questions; in 2021, it collected information from about 22 thousand respondents over 13 EU countries and the UK. The 2021 wave has included new questions on trust in other people and institutions as well as support for lockdown restrictions and vaccination. The project produces research outputs such as datasets, scientific journal articles, policy briefs and media contributions, and will replicate and expand the survey annually in the upcoming years. Finally, it also strives to forecast trends and produce policy recommendations based on the data which can assist decision-makers on strengthening trust and solidarity across the Union.

Trust

Trust is the cement of society. Trust can be defined as the shared and established belief, among member of a certain community, in the reliability, veracity and ability of other people’s or institutions’ operations. High interpersonal trust is important to the success and venture capacity of a group to the extent that individuals and institutions will endeavour into more creative and risk-bearing solutions; when trust is exiguous, more guarantees are needed and collective risk-taking is more difficult. Trust is also an essential ingredient for social cohesion as a foundation to cooperation and peaceful collective decision-making: previous evidence shows that countries with high levels of trust and civic engagement demonstrate stronger political stability, voice, accountability and absence of violence (World Development Report 2013). It is also a critical element of social capital, economic development and income equality. As ‘virtually every commercial transaction has in itself an element of trust’ (Arrow 1972, 357), trust acts a foundation to normal economic life. By arguing that social cooperation is a key prerequisite for to economic development, Algan and Cahuc (2010) identify trust as a strong determinant for income per capita differences across countries. Education may play an important role by increasing trusting behaviour alongside increased political participation and efficacy (Education at a Glance 2015). By eliciting pro-social behaviours, trust touches upon all aspects of social and political life and increases the cohesiveness of the community. This impacts domestic governance and European integration, as well as the willingness to support solidarity flows across an heterogenous EU.

COVID-19 and public trust across the EU

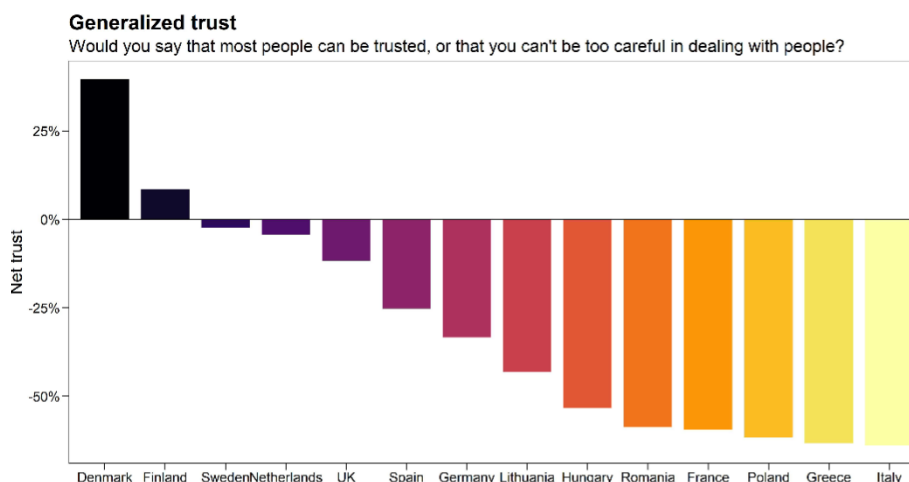
Trust is low and declining, which is bad news for EU solidarity. Our data shows that trust in other people, domestic governments and the EU are generally very low across the board. In a large majority of countries, net trust in each of the levels of analysis is negative, i.e., more citizens distrust people, governments and the EU than not. Trust in one level of analysis is a good predictor of other levels as trust in all three dimensions is highly correlated, as well as with other attitudes such as left-right placement or nationalism. Additionally, cross-country variance is enormous: while wealthier Scandinavian and some other North-Western countries exhibit higher levels of trust, the less wealthy South-Eastern countries and France have very low levels of trust. In said countries, usually between 60% to 80% of respondents on average do not trust each other and institutions. This generalised mistrust and high cross-country heterogeneity is bound to have an impact on the willingness of citizens to allocate resources to the less well-off, whether inside or outside their borders, thus hampering both domestic and EU solidarity.

However, trust did not collapse with COVID-19. The pandemic has generated great pressures on citizens and institutions and left virtually no area of social life untouched. Governments demanded a lot of restrictions and abnegations from citizens, who in turn thoroughly scrutinised institutional performance. However, despite the full-fledged implications of the pandemic, criticism of restrictions and vaccination plans, our data indicates that the average variation in trust between 2020 and 2021 was quite modest: -4% for trust in other people, -6% for trust in national governments and, surprisingly, a 1% increase in trust for the EU. Given the very unequal distribution of pandemic effort and mixed policy success (due, in no small measure, to policy innovation and experimentalism at a moment defined by doubt and adversity), the fact that people did not lose their nerve in the face of social hardship indicates that trust is more resilient than previously assumed - a claim which also entails it will be harder to deter its progressive erosion.

Trust in other people

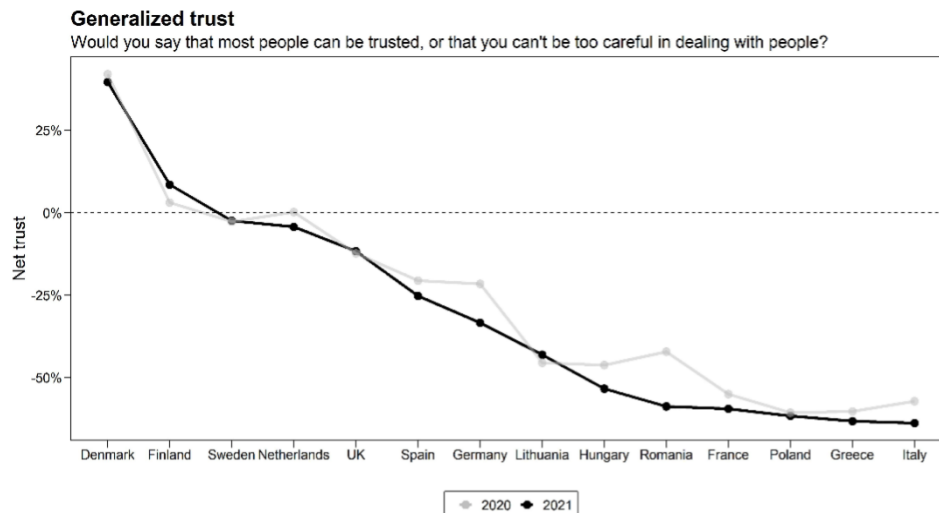
Europeans tend not to trust other people. When asked whether most people can be trusted or not, most Europeans tend to agree with the latter. Interpersonal trust is generally very low. In 2021, 65% of respondents across the surveyed countries declared they distrust other people. Countries behave very differently with regards to trust in others, with net trust ranging from 40% in Denmark to -65% in Italy. It appears wealthier countries with more efficient institutions tend to exhibit higher levels of interpersonal trust, with the exception of France which shares with other South-Eastern countries a place in the 'less trusting' end of the EU. 35% of respondents reported trusting others in 2020, declining to 33% in 2021; erosion of trust occurred at different pace across the Union, either more accentuated (e.g. Romania or Germany), less accentuated (e.g. Poland or Greece) or even registering timid advances (Lithuania and Finland). Overall, net interpersonal trust decreased 5%, being now at is -29% - a suboptimal figure to many accounts.

Figure 1. Trust in other people



Q59: Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people? Possible answers: 'Most people can be trusted', 'You can't be too careful', 'Don't know'. Results display net trust in %, i.e., the difference between those who trust and those who do not trust other people

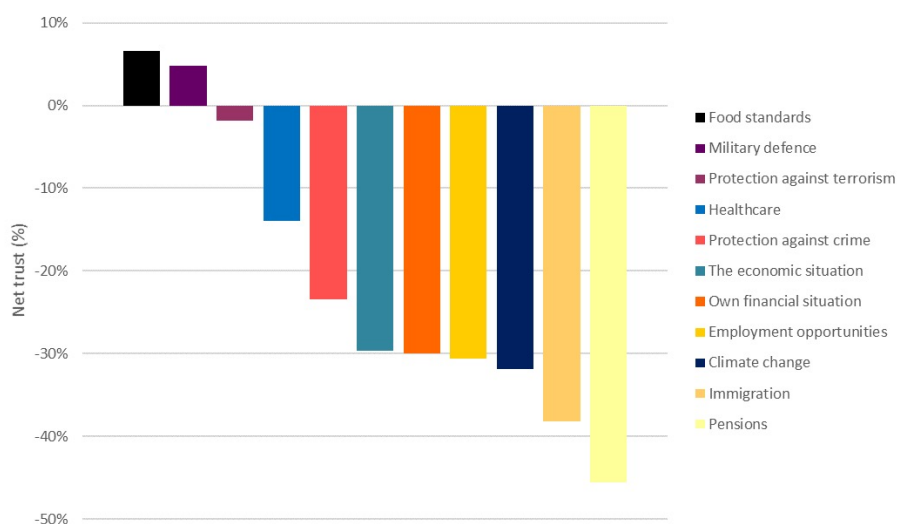
Figure 2. Trust in other people. Q59. Results display net trust in %



Trust in national governments

Citizens trust governments more on matters of internal security and defence than on handling economic and other exogenous crises. Another question raised by the survey ascertained whether respondents trusted their national government to make things better in a number of areas. The results can be appreciated in the table below. Classical state functions such as military defence or protection against terrorism receive generally higher levels of trust from individuals than more economic-oriented issues such as pensions, employment, personal finances or the national economy. Interestingly, trust on the ability of national governments to deal with exogenous shocks is heterogeneously spread: a majority of citizens trusts the national government to prevent a military attack, but not climate change or immigration.

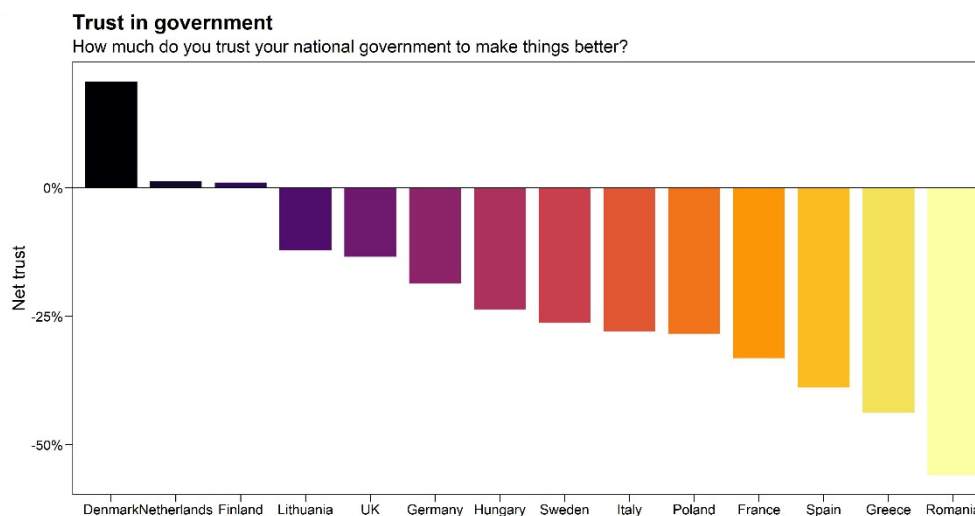
Figure 3: Trust in national government, by issue



Q15: 'How much do you trust your national government to make things better in the following areas?' Possible answers: 'Trust a lot', 'Trust a fair amount', 'Do not trust very much', 'Do not trust at all', 'Don't know enough to say'. Results display cross-country average net trust in %.

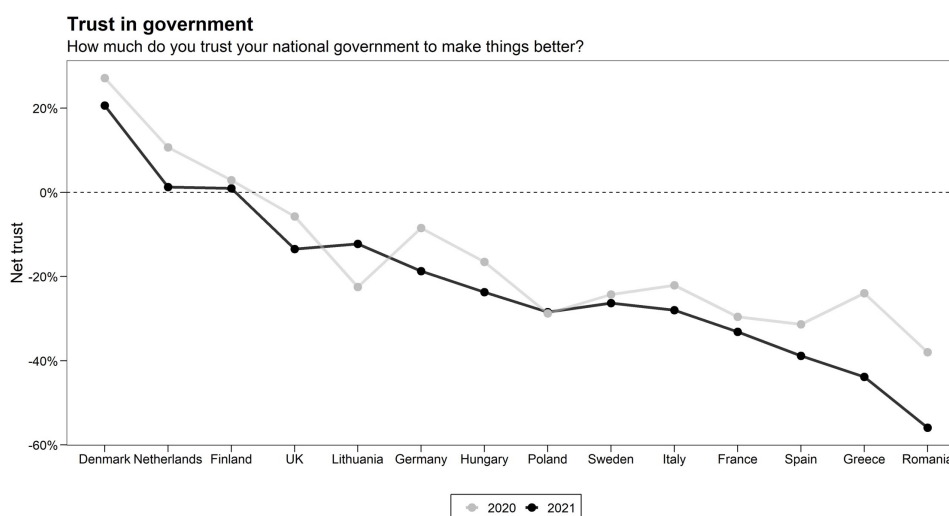
Trust in national governments is higher than trust in others or in the EU but suffered the sharpest plunge in comparison to 2020. Results were averaged across the 11 areas of intervention in order to obtain national averages. Overall, trust in national governments is low, with an average 61% of respondents saying they do not trust national governments to make things better across the 14 surveyed countries. Despite that, trust in government still supersedes trust in the EU and in other people, with an overall net trust of -21%. The only countries with a trusting majority are Denmark, the Netherlands and Finland. As with interpersonal trust, results vary greatly across countries. Net trust ranges from 20% in Denmark to -61% in Romania. Overall net trust receded by 6% and, when compared to 2020, is lower in every country except for Lithuania. This decline is the most significant among all three levels of analysis. Again, this is more pronounced in some countries than in others, with a mixed group of Greece, Romania, Germany and the Netherlands heading the largest contractions, whereas Lithuanians report trusting their government 12% more than last year.

Figure 4. Trust in national government, by country



Q15. Results display average net trust across 11 areas of intervention in %.

Figure 5. Trust in national government, by country

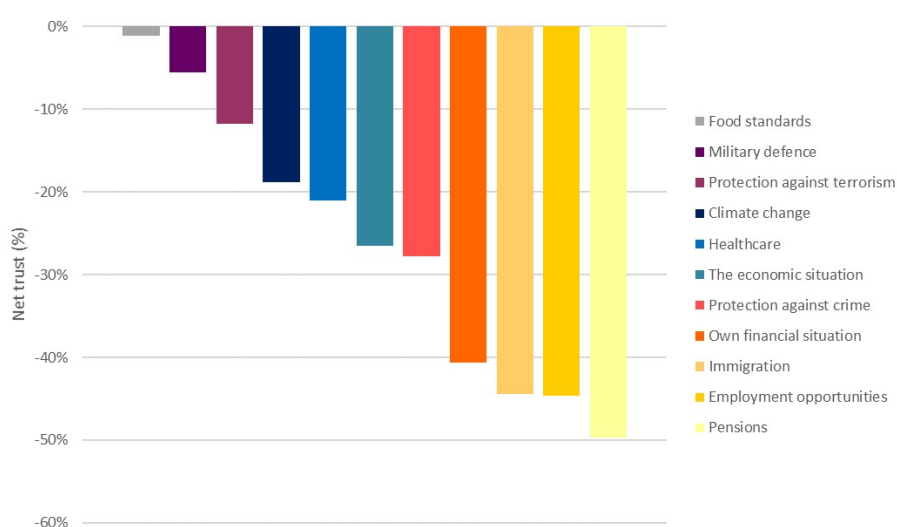


Q15. Results display average net trust across 11 areas of intervention in %.

Trust in the European Union

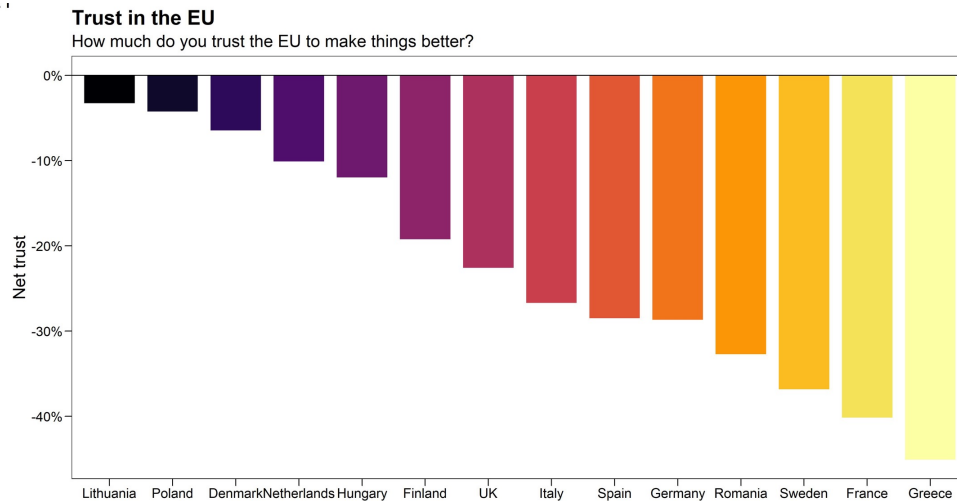
A majority of Europeans does not trust the EU will improve things in all areas of intervention. Finally, the survey interrogated respondents regarding their trust on whether the EU would make things better in the same 11 areas highlighted in the previous chapter. The results can be seen below in Figure 6. Importantly, the EU has an overall negative net trust in all areas of intervention. Trust that the EU will improve on areas related to an economic dimension – particularly pensions, employment and immigration – is worse than on matters dealing with defence and security. This is odd for a Union with no army or unified police, but may be partially explained by the difficulty in setting apart governmental and EU responsibilities in these matters. In conclusion, the fact that net trust is negative for all surveyed areas of intervention is a manifestation of an underlying problem for EU integration, common decision making and popular support for the establishment of an encompassing and resilient solidarity system within the Union.

Figure 6. Trust in the EU, by issue

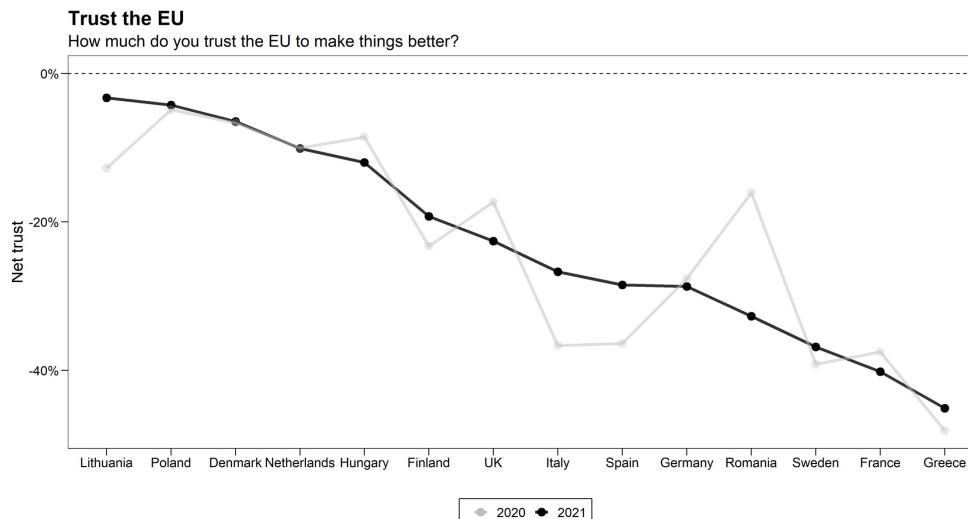


Q16: 'And how much do you trust the European Union to make things better in the following areas?'. Answers are the same as Q15. Results display cross-country average net trust in %.

Overall trust in the EU is relatively low but has increased in 2021. Net trust in the EU is generally very low, with an overall net trust of -27% across the surveyed countries. In 2021, 63% of respondents across the 14 surveyed countries did not trust the EU to make things better. Net trust is negative in all countries, meaning that in every country there are more people distrusting the EU than the contrary. Here, the groups are particularly more amalgamated: while the countries with more or less net trust include Romania and Greece but also typically more trusting countries such as Sweden or Germany, countries reporting higher levels of trust in the EU include Denmark and the Netherlands but paradoxically also Poland, a relatively distrusting country in other levels of analysis (and one increasingly less at ease within the Union, at least in political terms). This heterodoxy defies the dichotomy among the North-West/South-East blocks and may open further avenues for increased trust in countries with generally lower levels of institutional trust. In contrast to the other two levels of analysis, trust in the EU has actually increased (about 1%) from 36% in 2020 to 37% in 2021. While Romania's trust in the EU levels plummeted, in other South-East European countries trust has increased (e.g. Italy, Lithuania and Spain). North-Western countries remained stable, with very similar shares to those in 2020. In short, trust in the EU is broadly low and heterogeneous across member-states, i.e., defiant of a 'block logic'. This can be good news for the prospect of improved EU trust rates, given that typically beneficiary countries see an increase in trust which is not accompanied by an erosion of trust in the countries that usually supply solidarity.

Figure 7. Trust in the EU, by country

Q16: 'And how much do you trust the European Union to make things better in the following areas?'. Answers are the same as Q15. Results display average net trust across 11 areas of intervention in %.

Figure 8. Trust in the EU, by country

Q16: 'And how much do you trust the European Union to make things better in the following areas?'. Answers are the same as Q15. Results display average net trust across 11 areas of intervention in %.

Solidarity

Solidarity matters for Europeans and for Europe

Solidarity is a vital tool for resource redistribution within a polity. It allows for a more resilient and effective common protection against hardship, consolidates the sense of belonging around common goals and incentivises ambition and risk-taking. However - given the finitude of means -, the transfer of fiscal, technological, medical and political resources from the more fortunate to the less well-off requires that members within that community recognise the need to share the burden of social risks among each other. In other words, solidarity exists as long as normative expectations of mutual support between groups are fulfilled.

Solidarity has an insurance dimension. Individuals strengthen the resilience of the entire community by pooling resources for a rainy day, but this effort is not unconditional. Firstly, intertemporal trade-offs are often difficult to conceive by citizens and governments and hard to rally support for, especially if

short-term pains are required for less tangible distant returns. Secondly, risk-pooling must fall on the shoulders of large and heterogeneous communities, ensuring perceptions of equity and fairness in solidarity flows and insurance turn-taking. The suspicion of moral hazard, whereby contributions are unequally spread across members and pooled resources are used recklessly or abusively by some, is fundamentally detrimental to the purposes and sustainability of solidarity itself, and even to social and political cohesion at large.

Public support is an important prerequisite for solidarity. Citizen attitudes towards solidarity matter as voters play an important role in the outcome of intergovernmental negotiations where solidarity supply is agreed upon. By conditioning the electoral fate of national governments, the way 'silent majorities' across the Union perceive EU solidarity deserves an important appraisal. Hence, it is the purpose of this section to look into what citizens really think about European solidarity.

European solidarity in times of COVID-19

The pandemic intensified solidarity demand. Last year's EUI-YouGov report (Cicchi et al, 2020) provided a comprehensive insight on how the COVID pandemic influenced solidarity within the EU. In the face of an abrupt exogenous shock with wide-ranging and asymmetric consequences, the report suggested that EU solidarity underlying common responses was in high demand, but in short supply. Solidarity demand increased with large-scale restrictions to basic rights and freedoms, overburdened health care services and the asymmetry of fiscal capacities within the EU to deal with the economic shock brought by months of economic activity suspension and an economic halt - breaking a cycle of economic growth, especially in the more fragile Southern Europe.

Solidarity supply still echoed classical moral hazard concerns but avoided the mistakes of the 2010s financial crisis. The European Council meeting of July 2020 was arguably the key event where supply for European solidarity was put to the test. European leaders reached a landmark agreement on unprecedented instruments for resilience and redistribution within the EU, chiefly regarding the long anticipated common debt issuance – the coronabonds – to finance the Next Generation EU (NGEU) stimulus package. Also, the Commission was able to efficiently coordinate EU-wide vaccination acquisition and rollout. Broadly, governments and the EU steered away from the unflinchingly individualistic responses of the past decade, particularly during the financial and migrant crises, when solidarity supply was definitely lower than in 2020. However, divisions among governments were clear and echoed the concerns citizens – and, crucially, voters – have regarding cross-border solidarity, particularly grant dependency, free-riding and reciprocity concerns. While the North-West was more eager to reduce the level and scope of solidarity, ranging from stauncher opposition from the 'frugal four' to milder recalcitrance from Germany and France, the South-East was generally supportive of a more solidaristic approach.

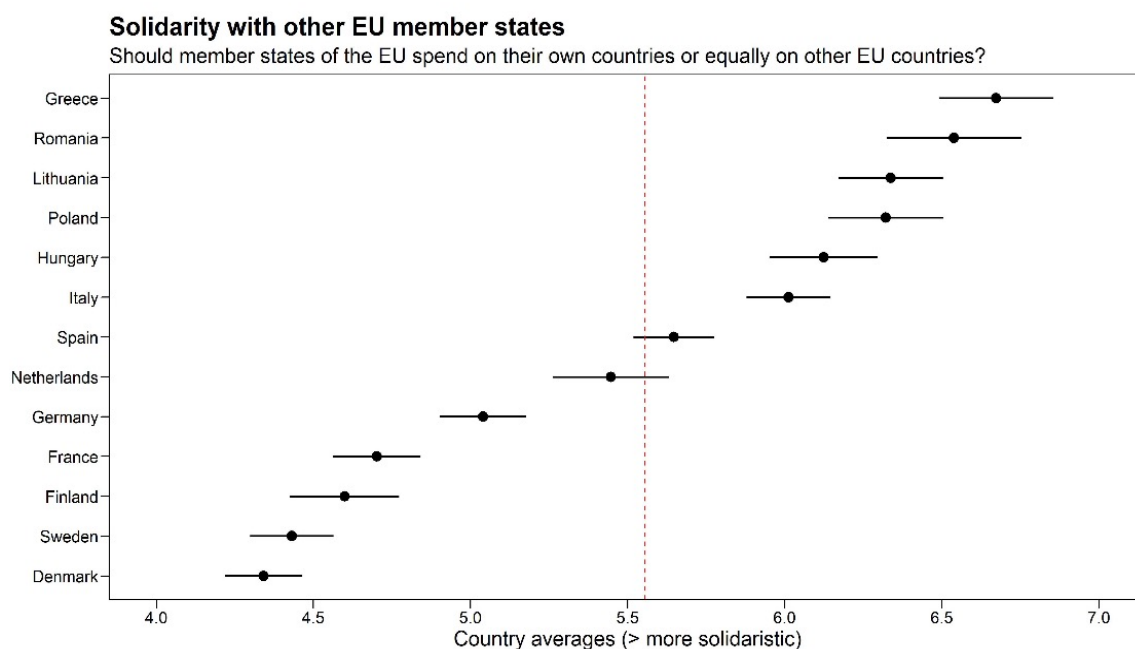
On this issue, three important conclusions can be extracted for EU solidarity in 2021:

- Attitudes towards EU solidarity throughout the year remained largely stable despite the wide-reaching economic, social and health implications from the COVID-19 pandemic and, in 2021, the first evaluations of the EU stimulus package implementation.
- The nature of the crisis is still key to attitudes towards EU solidarity. While exogenous shocks (particularly natural disasters and epidemics) elicit a more solidaristic response by citizens, crises of an endogenous nature (e.g. debt and unemployment) produce lower and less unanimous levels of support for cross-border relief. This issue-specific solidarity gap is wider across domestic publics today than it was a year ago.

General outlook on EU solidarity across the EU

Despite the annus horribilis of 2020, the outlook on citizen support for EU solidarity is still one of contained optimism. In line with conclusions from last year's report, support for solidarity within the EU is real, although conditioned by several factors as will be seen below. The survey inquired respondents whether national governments should spend national resources only domestically or pool them in service of all EU member-states and peoples. This general question is crucial as it works as a barometer for EU solidarity across domestic publics; results are synthesised in Figures 12 and 13. Data for the thirteen countries indicates that the net average solidarity indicated by respondents in 2021 remains in positive terrain: 5,56 out of 10. Another positive reading is that countries do not spread greatly around the general average, indicating consonance in support for EU solidarity across domestic publics. Despite the unprecedented suspension of normal economic life and socio-economic hardship, in global terms, average net support for EU solidarity remained stable across all thirteen countries with a negligible decline of 0,3% in 2021 (see Figure 14). Germany, a key player who is greatly influential in solidarity supply, features among those where net solidarity increased in 2021. Much like with trust, the fact that the pandemic did not fundamentally damage or polarise support towards EU solidarity is sign of hope for the future. However, the old tales of the frugal and the solidaristic still ring true after the pandemic struck; South-East publics remain generally more inclined towards sharing resources with other EU countries while wealthier North-West countries are less solidaristic.

Figure 12. Solidarity with other member states (2021)



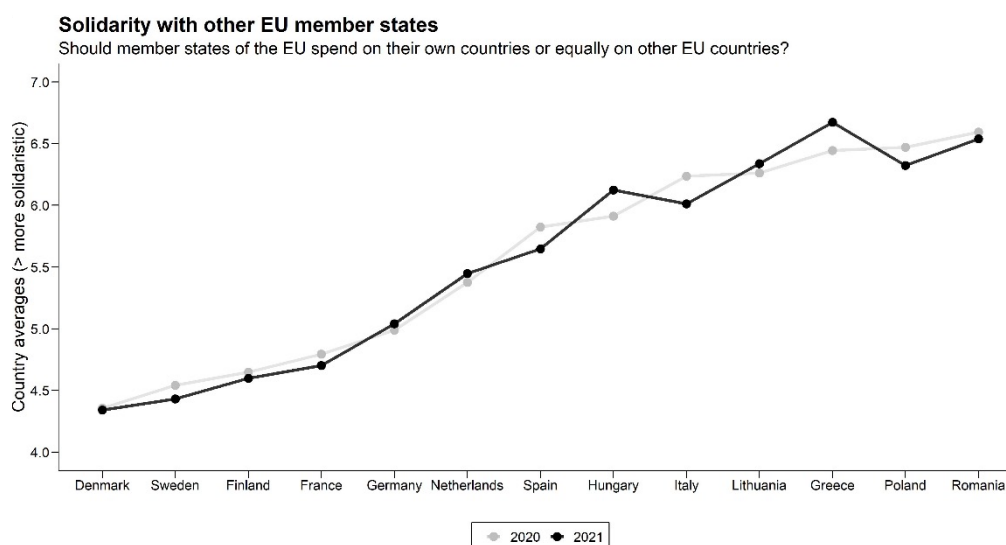
Q18: 'Some people think that the member states of the European Union should mostly spend their resources on their own countries and the welfare of their own people. Other people think that the member states of the European Union should pool their resources and spend them on all countries and all people across the whole of the European Union. What about you – on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means 'Spending resources only on your own country and your own people', and 10 means 'Spending resources equally on all countries and all people in the European Union', where would you put your opinion?'. Results display net solidarity, from 1 to 10.

Figure 13. Solidarity with other member states, by country



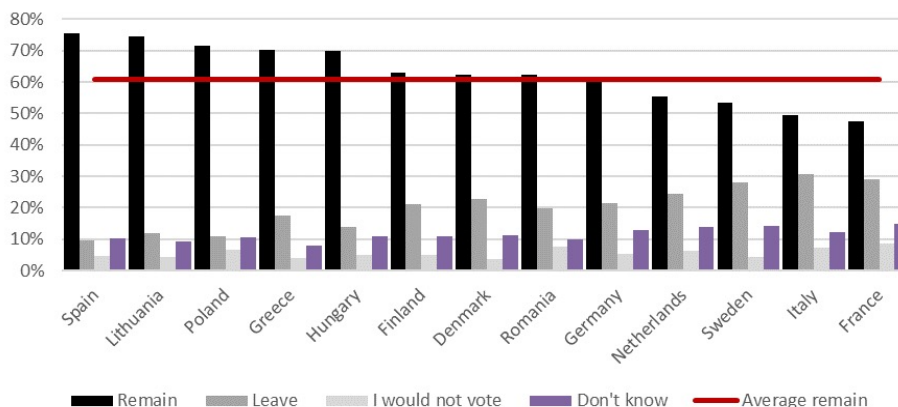
Q18. Darker colours represent stronger support for solidarity.

Figure 14. Solidarity with other member states, by country



Q18. Results display net solidarity, from 1 to 10, in 2020 and 2021

Solidarity is multidimensional and balanced by high willingness to remain within the EU. As was previously identified in last year's report, attitudes towards EU solidarity in 2021 are conditional on several factors: solidarity is national first and EU-wide second; it is issue-specific; it decreases with geographical distance; and it is driven by perceptions of own gain and risk. However, once the decision to establish solidarity supply is taken, citizens prefer that resources are channelled via centralised EU-led frameworks rather than bilaterally from one country to another. Fears of moral hazard still haunt expansion of EU solidarity; however, when we frame them in light of the potential EU countries have to leave the Union - thus abandoning the common solidarity flow system -, data shows this extreme scenario can nonetheless be dismissed: even the most 'frugal' countries display substantial levels of attachment to EU membership. France is now the most Eurosceptic country, which can be concerning due to its global importance in the Union. However, the overall cross-country average for remaining in the EU is 61%, comfortably in positive territory.

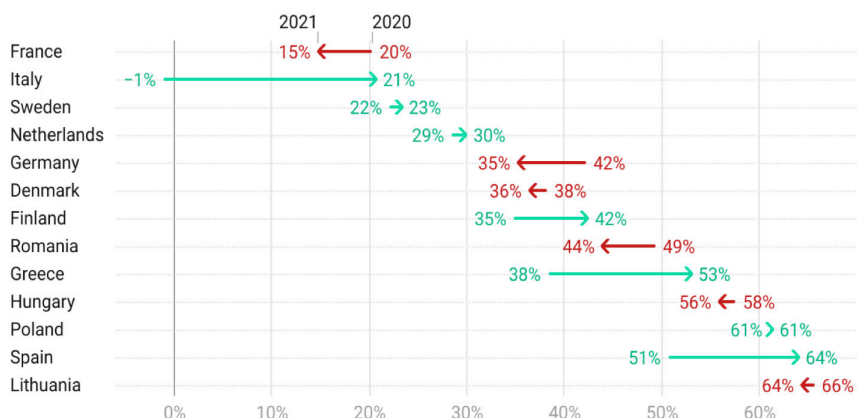
Figure 15. Support for EU membership, by country

Q9: 'If there was a referendum on membership of the European Union, how would you vote?'. Possible answers: 'I would vote to remain a member of the European Union', 'I would vote to leave the European Union', 'I would not vote', 'Don't know'. Results display shares of respondents, in %.

Figure 16. Support for EU membership

Referendum on EU membership

Comparing net support for remain in 2020 and 2021



Q9. Results display shares of respondents, in %. Green colours indicate an increase in comparison to 2020, red colours indicate a decrease.

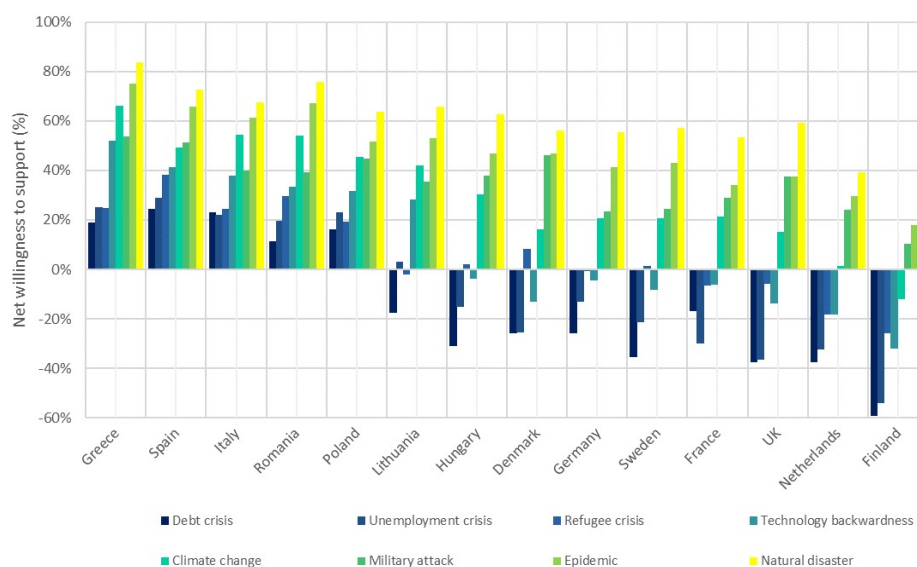
Specific dimensions of solidarity

Issue-specific

Solidarity is issue-specific; exogenous shocks elicit more solidaristic responses. Respondents were asked whether they think their country should help others in the event of a crisis. Eight types of crises were selected: Natural disaster, epidemic, military attack, climate change, technology backwardness, refugee pressures, unemployment and debt. Most respondents were more prone to agree when the crisis at hand had an exogenous origin, i.e., when the factual or perceived cause of the problem had to do with factors beyond domestic control (natural disaster, pandemic, military attack, climate change, etc.). This could be because exogenous shocks tend to require urgent action and escape the narrative of the more and less 'deserving' at the core of the moral hazard logic; whereas exogenous crises are usually not attributable to policy failure and lack a 'human' face, endogenous crises (debt and unemployment) are often connected to government mistakes, uncompetitive national economies and fiscal profligacy. Like last year, exogenous shocks are still the leading issues for support to EU

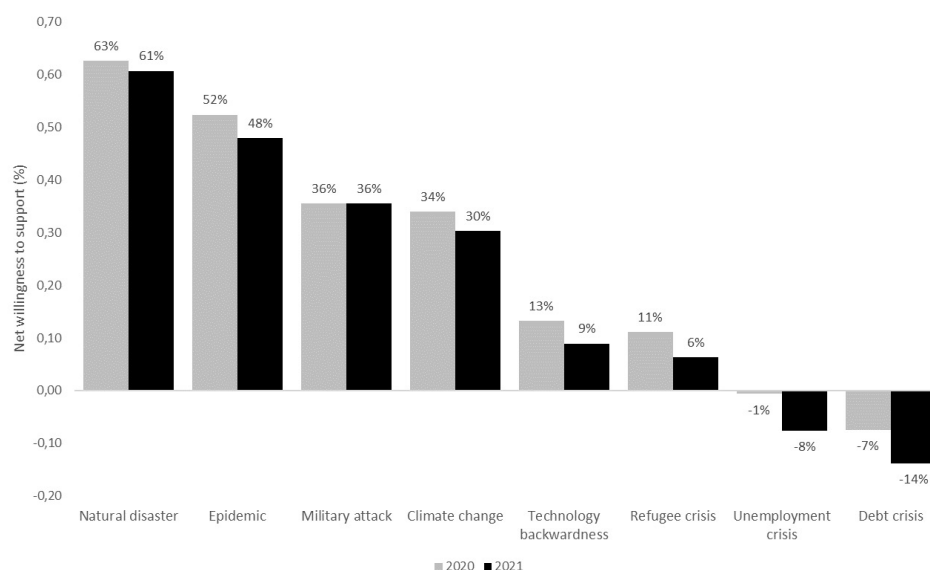
solidarity, whereas endogenous issues rank last. While net support for pandemic solidarity is positive in all countries, debt solidarity is only positive in Poland, Romania, Greece, Spain and Italy (see Figure 17). There is a large cross-border concurrence in that exogenous crises are more deserving of solidarity flows than endogenous crises whereas debt and unemployment crises prove to be much more controversial across national publics. The yearly difference in net willingness to support is greater in the event of unemployment (-7%), debt (-6%) and refugee (-5%) crises. An important conclusion may arise from these developments: the issues that least mobilised EU solidarity in 2020 are also the same that registered highest support erosion in 2021. In other words, this aggravated the gap between endogenous crises for which support was already feeble, and exogenous shocks. In an heterogeneous Union with high demand for increased redistribution and a stronger fiscal union, this downward trend may be problematic as abrades the grounds for solidarity supply needed to mitigate the consequences of future economic shocks.

Figure 17. Net support for solidarity by country & issue

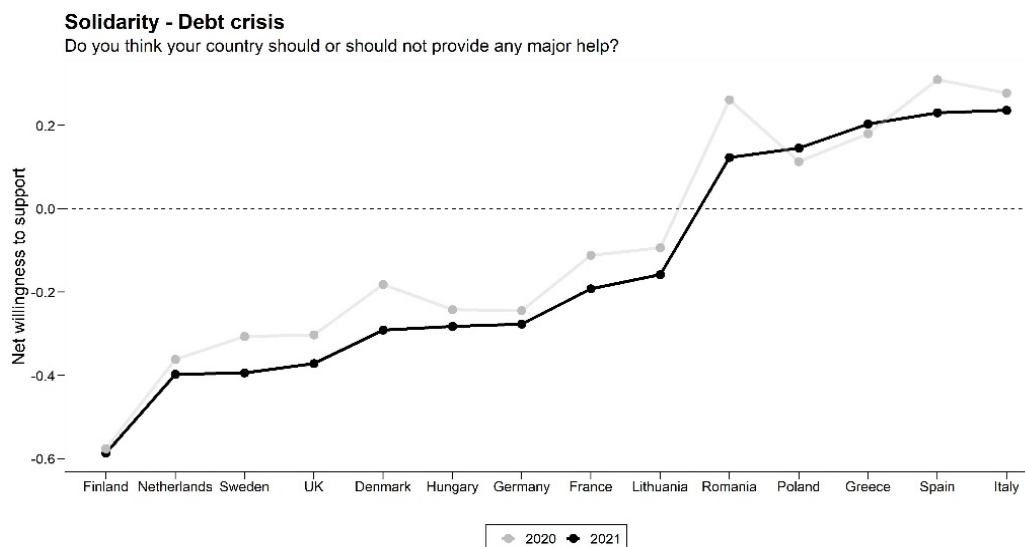


Q21 to Q41. The survey ask whether respondents would be willing to help in each of the eight crises. Results display net willingness to support, in %.

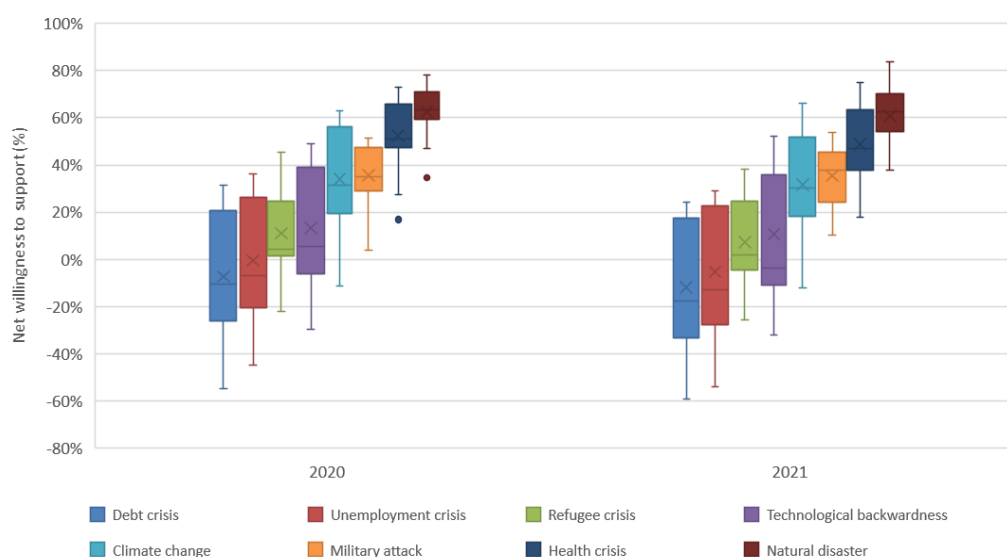
Figure 18. Net support for solidarity by issue



Q21 to Q41. Results display net willingness to support, in %, for 2020 and 2021.

Figure 19. Net support for debt solidarity by country

Q24. Results display net willingness to support, from 1 to 10, for 2020 and 2021.

Figure 20. Net support for solidarity by issue

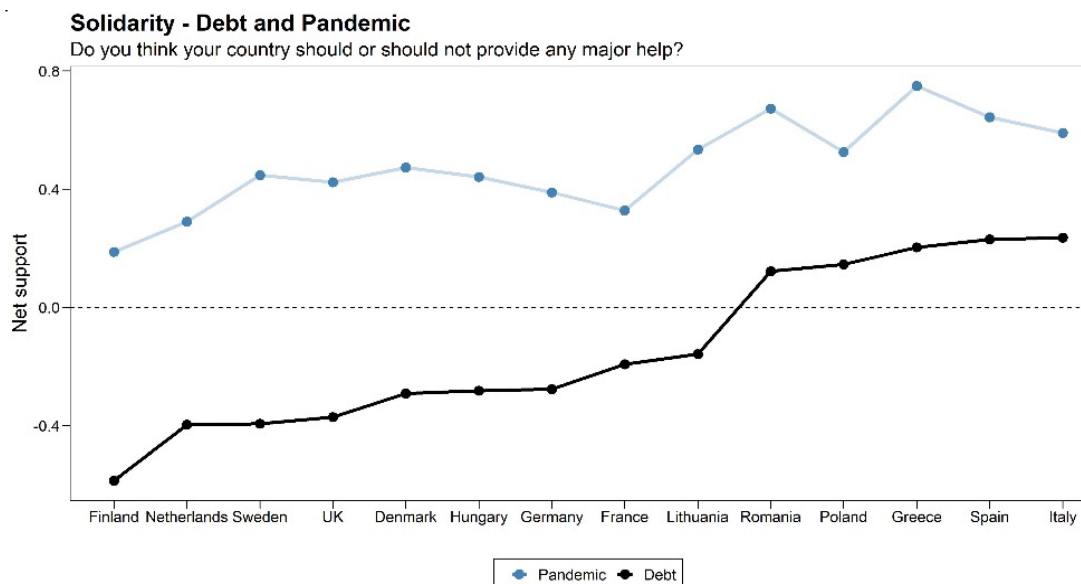
Q21 to Q41. Boxes display cross-country variance in net willingness to support, in %, for 2020 and 2021.

National publics' views on issue solidarity are less unanimous in 2021 than in 2020. The cross-country variance in support for EU solidarity has increased in most issues between 2020 and 2021. This means there is less consensus across the surveyed publics on whether to support other countries. Increase in variance occurred particularly for endogenous shocks. This suggests that the solidarity gap is widening, with debt and unemployment crises in particular receiving not only much lower average support than exogenous shocks, but also less unanimous support across the Union, especially between the recalcitrant North-West and more solidaristic South-East countries.

The solidarity gap in issue solidarity may complicate efforts for solidarity expansion. By framing unprecedented fiscal solidarity and the NGEU recovery funds in the context of COVID-19 and climate change and not debt or unemployment, the Commission steered away from predictable resistance from the frugal countries. While astute, this reveals the fragilities of long-term EU solidarity scope expansion, as endogenous crises still elicit fears of moral hazard and lack of

reciprocity. Additionally, support for pandemic solidarity has abated to some extent in 2021. This may endanger the political capital the EU used to consolidate its unprecedented solidarity measures. At any rate, and despite these rather marginal developments, support for pandemic solidarity remains high and likely still capable of leveraging a reserve of goodwill for further solidarity in the EU.

Figure 21. Net support for debt & pandemic solidarity by country

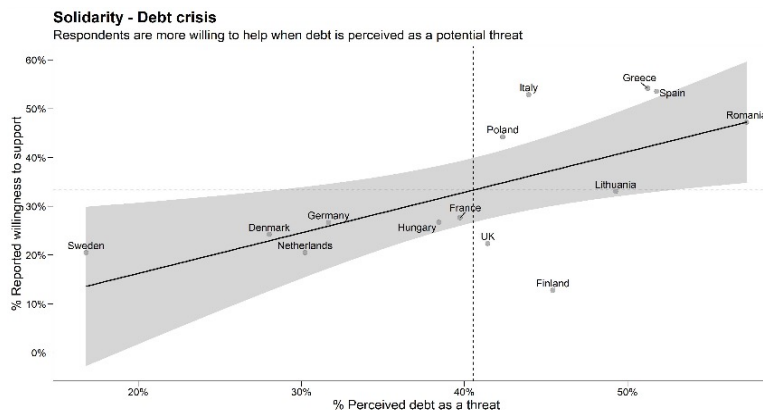


Q24 and Q40. Results display net willingness to support, from 1 to 10.

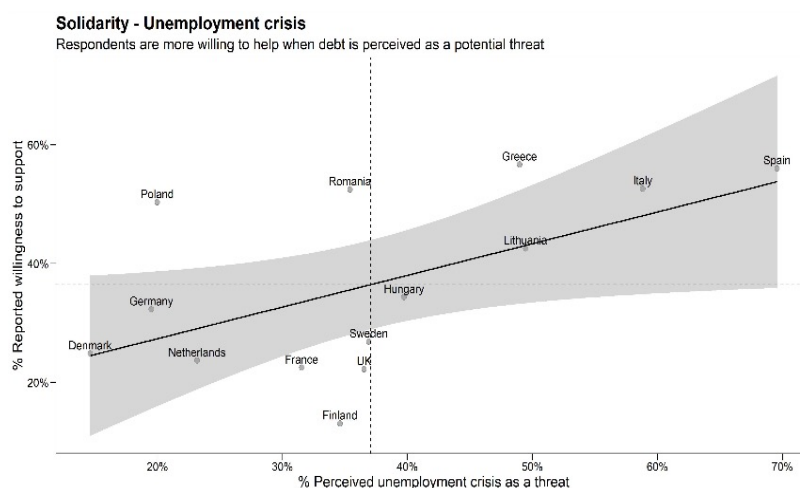
In conclusion, a strong EU-wide consensus around the merits of insurance solidarity in the case of external shocks may provide a good popular support basis for enhanced European solidarity around important present and future challenges such as COVID-19, climate change and future epidemics. On the other hand, the aggravating situation for debt and unemployment solidarity is a sign that current EU recovery efforts may be a one-off, as it is still in the (electoral) interest of 'frugal' governments to oppose increased fiscal solidarity and solidarity flows within the EU.

Drivers of EU solidarity

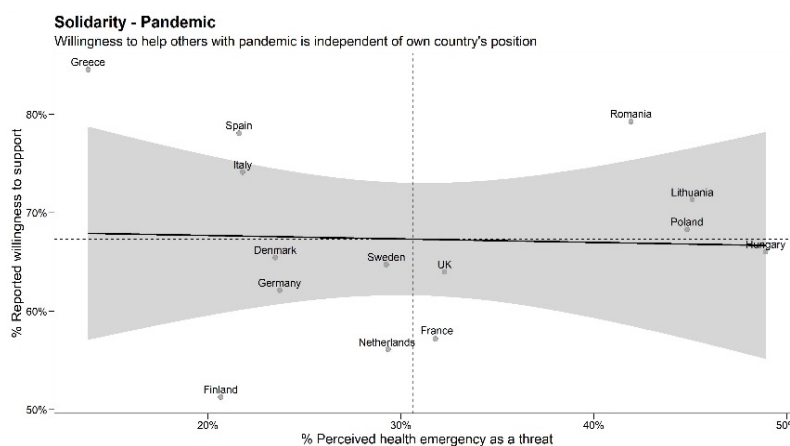
Solidarity is conditional on net-benefit perception and threat perception. Looking into the drivers of support for EU solidarity, two conclusions can be extracted: first, it is connected to citizens' perceptions of net-benefit from solidarity flows to their countries, although this utilitarian driver is more mitigated in exogenous shocks than endogenous crises. Second, public support for solidarity in a crisis is also associated to the extent to which citizens perceive that crisis to be a threat to their countries. However, this is nuanced: while in endogenous crises this relation tends to follow a self-interest logic, in the case of climate change we find a negative association, and regarding health crises there is no link at all. At any rate, overall levels of support for cross-border solidarity are generally higher in the South-East than in the North-West, corroborating the reading that support for cross-border solidarity is primarily utilitarian, whereby perceived net-losers tend to fear moral hazard while net-winners conjure higher solidaristic attitudes when others are in disarray.

Figure 22. Net support for debt solidarity and threat perception of by country

Q24 and Q79_new: 'Which TWO, if any, of the following do you think are the biggest threats facing your country in the coming years?'. The 8 issues are the same as in Figure 17. Results plot net willingness to support other countries in the event of a debt crisis and perception of debt as a threat for own country, in %. The shades represent 95% confidence intervals

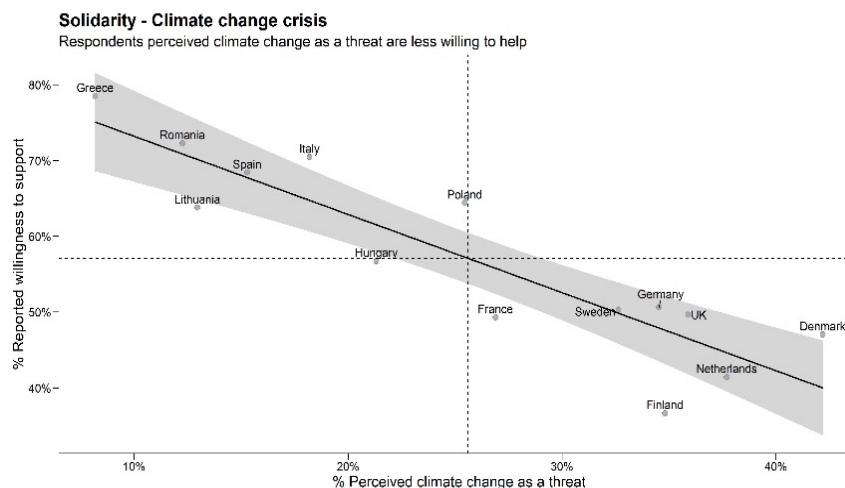
Figure 23. Net support for unemployment solidarity and threat perception of by country

Q31 and Q79_new. Results plot net willingness to support other countries in the event of unemployment crisis and perception of unemployment as a threat for own country, in %.

Figure 24. Net support for pandemic solidarity and threat perception of by country

Q40 and Q79_new. Results plot net willingness to support other countries in the event of a pandemic crisis and perception of a pandemic as a threat for own country, in %.

Figure 25. Net support for climate change solidarity and threat perception of by country

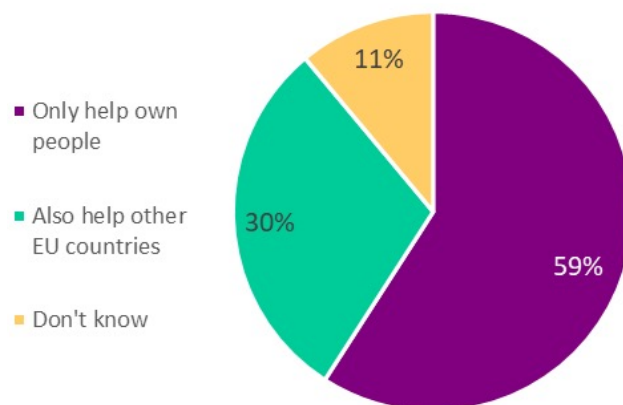


Q37 and Q79_new. Results plot net willingness to support other countries in the event of climate change crisis and perception of climate change as a threat for own country, in %.

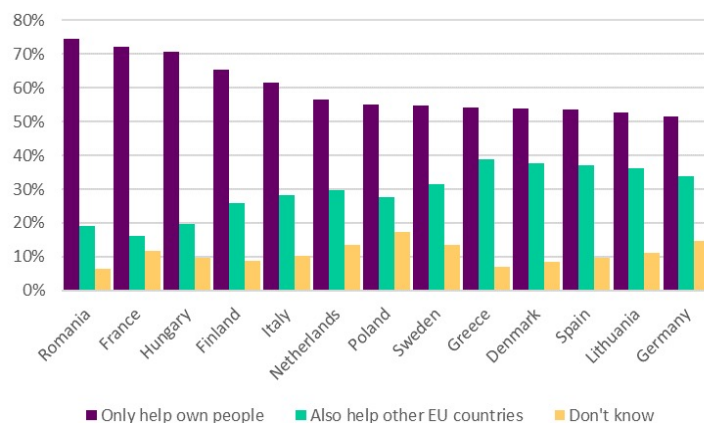
Second to national solidarity

Solidarity is national first. As undisclosed in last year's report, solidarity is national first. While support for pooling resources for solidarity towards other countries is moderately high, when asked whether they would support spending their own taxes (in lieu of government resources in general), a majority of respondents across all countries support spending them only on their own country (59%), 1% more than in 2020. On the bright side, the solidarity divide among blocks is not present here, with countries in the South-East and North-West present both in the 'selfish' end (Romania, France, Hungary and Finland and Italy) and in the more solidaristic end (Greece, Denmark, Spain, Lithuania and Germany). Germany has the lowest percentage of citizens exclusively supporting national solidarity, with little over half of respondents supporting it.

Figure 26. Preference for spending own taxes



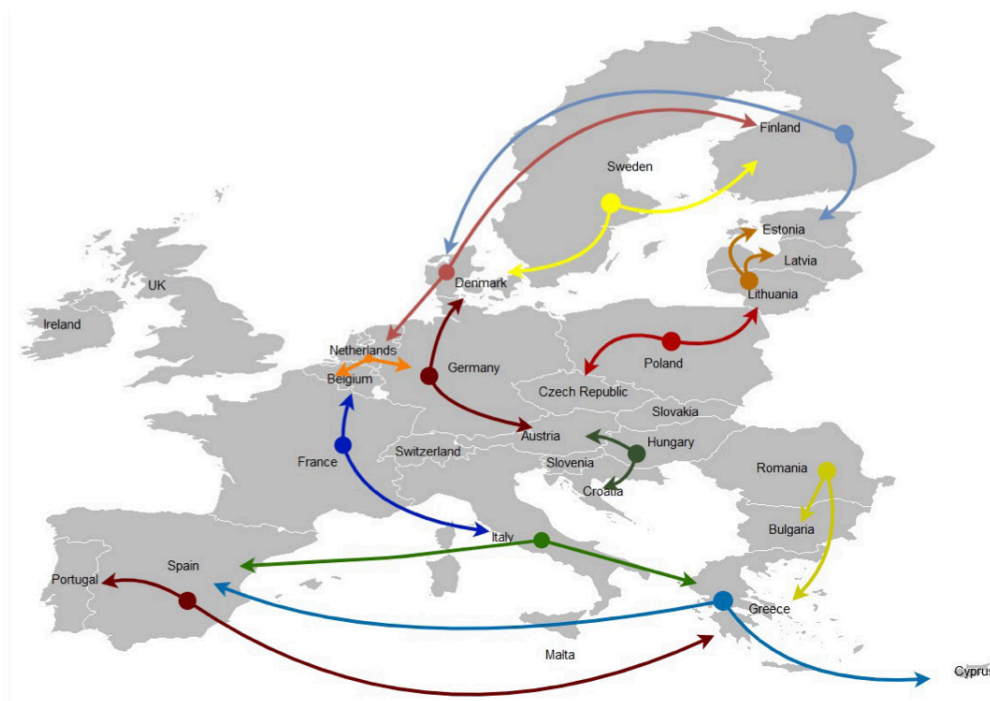
Q18a: 'Which statement comes closer to your view...?'. Possible answers: 'I would prefer all of my taxes to be spent on helping the people of my country', 'I would prefer some of my taxes to be spent on helping people in other countries in the European Union', 'Don't know'. Results show share of respondents, in %.

Figure 27. Preference for spending own taxes, by country

Q18a. Results show share of respondents, in %.

Contingent on geographical distance

Solidarity increases with geographical proximity. When asked whether citizens would prioritise countries more in need or neighbour countries, it was found that European publics' support towards EU solidarity displays a proximity bias, i.e., it is stronger towards countries in their vicinity instead of countries in a more distant end of the Union, possibly for economic or cultural reasons.

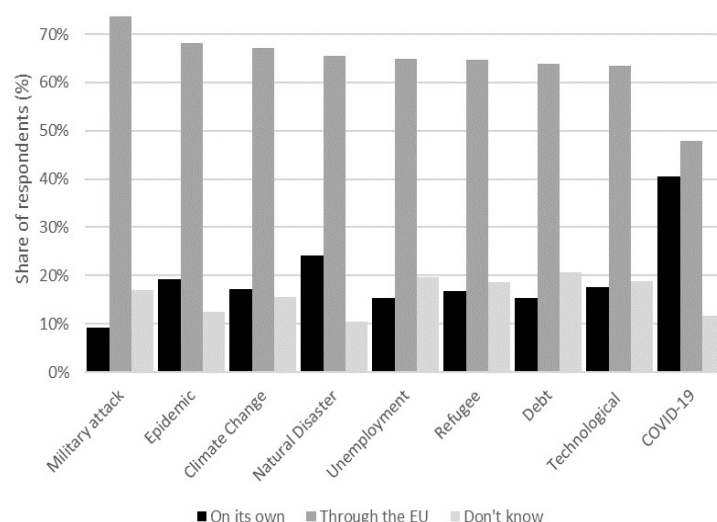
Figure 28. Solidarity for whom? Solidarity and geographical proximity

Q20: 'Imagine a country suffered some kind of major crisis, and was looking for help from others. Do you think your country should or should not be willing to offer financial help to each of the following countries?'. Possible answers are: 'Should be willing to help', 'Should not be willing to help', 'Don't know' for each of 35 European and non-European countries available for choosing. The arrow starts in the survey country and flows to the 2 top choices.

Preferably channelled via the EU

Europeans prefer EU responses to crises. Once solidarity flows are already established, respondents prefer said solidarity to be channelled through joint EU institutions rather than via bilateral agreements. European publics have clear preference for European solutions, with little variance around a mean of 65% in favour of EU solutions across all issues. These figures have remained remarkably stable in comparison to 2020. Overall, the outlook for resource management preference is one of broad and unanimous support for EU solutions across issues, as seen below in Figure 29.

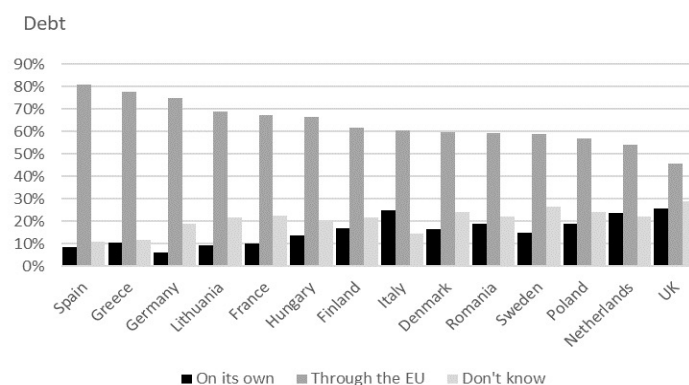
Figure 29. Mode of relief provision



Q21 to Q41 and Q79. For each of the 8 issues and COVID-19, a follow-up question would ask: 'Thinking about the [type of crisis] in your country, which of the following best reflects how you think it should have been tackled?'. Possible answers were 'My country should have concentrated on tackling the outbreak on a national level only', 'My country should have concentrated on working with other EU countries for a joint EU-led initiative', or 'Don't know'. Figure represents share of respondents, in %.

Support for EU management of COVID-19 is contested. An exception to this is the case for COVID-19: the share of respondents arguing for a EU-led management of COVID-19 relief has decreased 9% since 2020. This may have to do with the fact that the period in which the survey was conducted (April 2021) was punctuated by criticism against the Commission for delays in the vaccine rollout programme, which may partially explain these figures with more Danes, Germans and British preferring tackling the coronavirus outbreak domestically instead of regionally. Despite this, tackling the pandemic by working with other countries within the EU framework is still more popular than bilateral arrangements.

Figure 30. Mode of COVID-19 relief provision, by country



Q79. Figure represents share of respondents, in %.

Main political lessons

In an era when European and domestic politics are no longer insulated from each other but rather increasingly coupled, increasingly ‘party leaders in government worry about the electoral consequences of their European policies’ (Hooghe & Marks 2009). The extent to which voters condition the outcome of EU negotiations by holding their governments into account is not to a negligible degree. Consequently, this survey aims to shed light into how EU publics perceive trust and solidarity, in an effort to undisclose the electoral pressures that may shape and constrain decisions on European solidarity supply. To that end, a number of lessons of interest to policy makers can be yielded from our data, as follows:

1. COVID-19 was not a game changer in trust and solidarity. Despite the dramatic restrictions caused by the pandemic, uneven social hardship and mixed policy success, trust did not collapse. Some previous trends were accentuated – declining trust, low support for debt and unemployment solidarity and the dichotomy between a solidaristic and a frugal block – but the imperviousness of attitudes allows for some relief regarding the immediate future of trust and solidarity in the EU.
2. The EU needs to work on building trust. The outlook on public trust on the EU is still suboptimal. Two in every three respondents say they do not trust the EU to make things better. Citizens trust national governments substantially more on making things better regarding their own financial situation (11% more) and their employment opportunities (14% more), among other issues. However, they also trust the EU more than national governments on improving things regarding climate change (13% more) and the global economic situation (3% more), suggesting the EU should capitalise on this by emphasizing its green agenda and recovery plan. Indeed, in a context where trust is thin, cross-border solidarity flows (as is the case of NGEU) can amass positive feedback effects into building trust in the EU, if correctly applied. To that end, the EU could greatly benefit from better communication – as well as to steer away from issues which are heavily politicised domestically such as COVID-19 restrictions and compulsory vaccination.
3. The current post-COVID recovery package, if well implemented, can provide an important demonstration effect for EU solidarity. Support for EU solidarity is contingent on distributive concerns (net-benefit and risk perception), i.e., follows a reciprocal rather than moral- or identity-based incentive. Because of the exogenous origin and internationally symmetrical consequences of COVID-19 (making it more agreeable to some publics than e.g. a debt crisis) and its insurance-like nature (instead of a moral or identarian obligation to help other EU countries), NGEU can be seen as an example of a justified instance when the EU acted as a fair ‘equaliser’ against an exogenous threat. Preference for EU-led solutions is still high across all issues and countries, opening an avenue for the EU to take a leadership role in cross-border solidarity supply. However, some doubts on whether this opportunity has been effectively seized can be raised; support for a joint EU-led management of COVID-19 management has depreciated appreciably since 2020 and trust in the EU to make things better is lower than in governments, particularly in healthcare.
4. The recovery package beneficiaries need to do well. Given the ‘one-off’ step-up in solidarity supply, the experimentalist nature of NGEU and moderate support for solidarity across the Union, one of the few plausible predictions for the near future of EU solidarity is that it is reliant on a successful implementation of pooled resources, particularly on the mitigation of endogenous imbalances. European publics can feel defrauded if high hopes and political promises do not deliver or if implementation does not quell fears of moral hazard and recklessness in fund allocation. This can harden electorates, thus potentially contributing to constrict further concessions for future EU solidarity. In conclusion, the NGEU needs to do well (both in policy and political terms), precisely because trust is low and solidarity supply is not unlimited.
5. Pandemic solidarity is not immune to moral hazard fears. Relying on the spontaneous surge of pandemic solidarity derived from COVID-19 was an astute way to bypass resistance against

more fiscal solidarity and a generous recovery package. Nonetheless, the decline and increased cross-border controversiality of debt and unemployment solidarity, the contested nature of the EU management of the COVID-19 pandemic and the (limited) dwindling of pandemic solidarity serve as a cautionary tale to the limits of this political capital; epidemics are no *carte blanche* from citizens for unfettered expansion of solidarity, and moral hazard concerns still ring true.

6. Block divides on attitudes towards EU solidarity could be breached by better communication. Many scholars and policy experts investigate the reasons for overall low trust in the EU. One of the most common suggestions is that the EU should better communicate its political successes (e.g. vide Perceive Project's conclusions). Elites should stress the reciprocal and protective nature of EU solidarity, particularly in the less solidaristic North-West countries, where preference for turn-taking and insurance in cross-border solidarity is higher. Additionally, and because the pandemic is not an unlimited supply of goodwill for solidarity expansion, the merits of fiscal solidarity should be better presented to more frugal domestic publics. Particularly for trade-dependent countries, a segmented block with increasing populism and social hardship is not in their best interest. This is ultimately a low-risk endeavour, as many of these less-than-average solidaristic countries (e.g. Finland, Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden) display considerable levels of attachment to EU membership and the euro, thus decreasing fears of future exits from the Union. Finally, the 'block logic' does not always pan out (for instance, in trust for the EU) and the two largest countries in the EU – France and Germany – typically display middle-of-the-road attitudes towards EU solidarity, opening an avenue for communication to work as a bedrock for dynamic and changing pro-solidarity coalitions in future EU negotiations.

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